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Committee
Scottish Parliament

19 January 2026

Dear Karen,

Thank you for your correspondence of 12 December 2025 setting out the pre-budget scrutiny views of the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee for the Scottish Budget this parliamentary session.

I was pleased to appear jointly at the committee's pre-budget scrutiny session, alongside the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, and for this further opportunity to provide additional information by responding to the [committee's report](#). My response is set out in **Annex A**.

I look forward to continued engagement with the committee on these matters and trust that you will find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

KAUKAB STEWART

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ANNEX A

Response to the Pre Budget Scrutiny 2026-27: Human Rights Budgeting report

Introduction

This document responds to the pre budget scrutiny report [[Pre-Budget scrutiny 2026-27: Human Rights Budgeting | Scottish Parliament](#)] published on the 12th December 2025.

The Scottish Government welcomes the committee's focus on Human rights budgeting across the session. The Scottish Government is committed to making Scotland a leader in equality and human rights, increasing fairness, tackling inequality and removing societal and cultural disadvantages. A fundamental factor in achieving this comes from assessing how the Scottish Government is proposing to raise and spend money.

We also welcome the work undertaken with the Commission Advocating Rights for Minorities (CARM). Citizen participation is vitally important to ensure all voices are heard and I welcome the joint recommendations with CARM. We particularly valued citizen participation in the development of our recently published mainstreaming strategy in which we ran a series of deep dives on thematic areas to understand some of the foundational principles to mainstreaming, engaged key stakeholders on the six main drivers for change and a ran a 14 week written consultation exercise. The written consultation exercise was complemented by virtual citizen events held to discuss the consultation and focus on the content and structure of the toolkit. Around 100 external stakeholders attended, and their views were key in shaping the structure and content of the Strategy.

To aid the committee and other readers we have opted to reference the relevant paragraphs and recommendations from the committee's report in each section before offering a response. The structure is as follows:

1. Overview
2. Approach to this year's SIIA
3. Progress against EHRBAG Recommendations
4. Data Improvement
5. Transparency
6. The participation of citizens
7. Specific considerations on Employability Case Study

1. Overview

This section responds to paragraph 24.

Para 24. Before turning, however, to the specific issues the Committee has focused on, the Committee wishes to note in more general terms its disappointment in the progress made this session by the Scottish Government toward a human rights budgeting approach. It is disappointing to the Committee that as we come toward the end of the session many of recommendations being made by this Committee to the Scottish Government could have been made at the beginning of the session.

As the committee is aware, we have clear legal duties to carry out impact assessments, but our ambition goes further: to make sure every policy decision improves lives for those who need it most across Scotland. This year, we tested a novel approach by bringing all impact assessments together into a single process and publication to develop a holistic understanding of our fiscal decisions, now and in the future.

Since 2009 the Scottish Government published an Equality Impact Assessment, and latterly the Equality and Fairer Scotland Budget Statement (EFSBS), moving this year to a [Strategic Integrated Impact Assessment \(SIIA\)](#). This approach integrates multiple statutory duties together, to better understand the equality, fairness and other impacts of tax and spending decisions in the Budget, Spending Review and Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline (IDP). Our goal is to enhance both the efficiency and the effectiveness of these assessments.

The SIIA approach brings five impact assessments together into a single process and publication – giving a holistic view of fiscal decisions, now and in the future. It has been informed by international best practice and engagement with key stakeholders, such as the Welsh Government, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG) and the Equality and Human Rights Budget Advisory Group (EHRBAG). On 7 October 2025, the Scottish Government hosted the EHRBAG *Equality Budgeting Knowledge Exchange*, which explored the Role of Strategic Integrated Impact Assessments in advancing equality and human rights in budgeting. This collaborative event brought together international experts from across governments, devolved administrations, and civic society. Together with strengthened analytical tools such as the budget tagging pilots, this approach integrates evidence earlier and more effectively into decision-making. Integrating impact assessments in this way has the potential to improve decision-making by providing a more holistic picture and identifying synergies and trade-offs.

The SIIA was published on the 19 January – within a week of the Budget. This is in line with the timelines set out in guidance and law. Officials engaged with key stakeholders, including the Equalities and Human Rights Budget Advisory Group regarding this decision. The short delay ensured late decisions were accurately reflected, addressing stakeholder concerns, while allowing proper quality assurance.

Accountability

The Scottish Government remains committed to improving accountability with our public finances. On 8 December 2025, to fulfil the 2025-26 PfG commitment of “embedding equality and human rights across government and the wider public sector by publishing our Mainstreaming framework including an action plan and toolkit” we launched:

- **Mainstreaming Strategy** - provides a clear vision and framework for making lasting change in how we develop policy, deliver services, and allocate resources.
- **Mainstreaming Action Plan** - sets out 61 actions to embed equality and human rights across government systems and processes.
- **Mainstreaming Toolkit** - an online platform with over 100 resources that provides guidance, training materials and best practice examples to support the public sector to mainstream equality and human rights throughout their core functions.

Each of these enhance accountability. Taken together, the Strategy and Action plan provide an overview of how we are improving accountability within the Scottish Government and the wider public sector. More specifically, the Mainstreaming Strategy articulates a framework for action against six key drivers, including: Developing Accountability and Transparency. These drivers act as levers for change and reflect where we must focus our collective efforts to build a fairer Scotland.

2. Approach to this year's SIIA

The response in this section addresses recommendations 97 and 100.

97. We identified several ways in which the Scottish Government could improve both the Equality and Fairer Scotland Budget Statement, and the data which contributes to understanding and demonstrating how effective services are. We hope to see the Scottish Government take steps to further improve the EFSBS and the data used to assess services going forward.

100. The Scottish Government presents a positive narrative, but we have found the evidence behind this lacking. What is unclear from case studies is where the Government has considered where things aren't working, what lessons have been learned, and what could be done differently. This detail is crucial to understanding how the Government is taking accountability for the implementation of its policies. We recommend, therefore, that the Scottish Government use case studies which show the spectrum of experience instead of using the EFSBS case studies as a vehicle to highlight only success stories.

SIIA – overall approach

While we have clear legal duties to carry out impact assessments, but our ambition goes further. This is why, each year, we aim to strengthen our approach to impact assessments. This year, for the first time, we have tested a novel approach by bringing all impact assessments together through a single process and publication to develop a holistic understanding of our fiscal decisions, now and in the future.

As we say above, our approach has been informed by international best practice and engagement with key stakeholders, such as the Welsh Government, the OECD, the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG) and the Equality and Human Rights Budget Advisory Group (EHRBAG). Together with strengthened analytical tools, such as the budget tagging pilots, this approach integrates evidence earlier and more effectively into decision-making.

For the third year running, we held a cross-Ministerial Pre-Budget workshop, to assess impacts of emerging decisions on Protected Characteristics; Socio-economic disadvantage and Children's Rights and Wellbeing. We intend to evaluate the strategic integrated assessment approach, and the budget tagging, and will publish the results later this year. We continue to work with key stakeholders and international experts to understand how it can be developed further.

3. Progress against EHRBAG Recommendations

This section addresses comments made in paragraphs 33-36 of the report.

33. The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's ongoing commitment to EHRBAG and its recommendations.

34. At the same time, it appears evident to the Committee that meaningful progress is not being made towards achieving the overarching aims of the EHRBAG recommendations. The Committee was struck by the sense that the Scottish Government's narrative that it is using a budget approach which supports it in meeting human rights obligations does not match the lived experience of service users. This sense is evident throughout many of the other issues explored in this report.

35. The Committee was also struck by the absence of accountability for delivering on these recommendations. As we move into the next parliamentary session, progress on the recommendations made by EHRBAG must be delivered in practice.

36. Moreover, the Scottish Government must take on greater accountability for the delivery of these recommendations. This theme of accountability is explored further in the remainder of the report.

The EHRBAG action plan has been routinely monitored by senior officials in Scottish Exchequer and Equality, Inclusion and Human Rights, and reported to the EHRBAG twice per year. We wrote to the committee last year to provide an update on the EHRBAG recommendations and action plan.

In 2021, EHRBAG put forward a list of recommendations, which the government accepted, to improve how equality and human rights considerations are incorporated into core government processes. As the committee know, at the 11 June EHRBAG Meeting, members agreed that reporting on the Action Plan would be paused to allow focus on a set of priority actions while the group's current remit and Terms of Reference are reviewed. This will take place in early 2026. As part of this review, any unresolved actions from the group's recommendations made in 2021 will be revisited and discussed with the group to determine appropriate next steps.

Beyond this, a number of the equality and human rights budgeting and EHRBAG recommendations also feature in the new [Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Action Plan](#), for which a new governance framework is being developed and published in summer 2026. This will increase accountability for these actions, which include undertaking a strategic integrated impact assessment of the 2026-27 Budget, both in terms of process and publication, which considers all impact assessments in the round ahead of decisions being taken. This [strategic integrated impact assessment](#) was published on 19 January.

A further action will see us pilot budget tagging for each statutory duty for a select set of Level 4 budget lines, with a view to test the feasibility and impact of this approach and, if successful, roll this out more widely in the future. This builds upon the gender pilot work with the OECD last year, covering cross-cutting policy areas which focus on improving outcomes for women, such as child poverty.

Initial results have been published as part of the strategic integrated impact assessment. A full evaluation will be carried out later this year.

4. Data Improvement

This section responds to paragraphs 43-47 of the report.

44. While the Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's recognition of the importance of data, the evidence the Committee heard did not suggest that a satisfactory level of progress has been made in the collection and use of data.

45. As Professor O'Hagan stated, "If we do not have the data, how will we direct public resource to meet policy objectives." The Committee urges the Scottish Government to invest in better data collection and moreover to make better use of that data.

46. The Committee does acknowledge the progress the Scottish Government has made in building its data knowledge and infrastructure through its Equality Data Improvement Programme. However, the Committee is concerned at the lack of clear outcomes from this work and lack of detail on how the process has addressed concerns raised by the Committee and stakeholders earlier this session.

47. The Committee recognises that we are now too late in the session to see this kind of progress in this year's budget, but there must be a change in approach as move into session 7.

The current Equality Evidence Strategy (2023-2025)

The evaluation of the current Equality Evidence Strategy 2023-2025 is underway. The evaluation will draw together the findings from the interim review, the final individual updates of the 45 actions and reflections from action holders and the Equality Data Improvement Board. The evaluation will produce conclusions about the progress against action categories to assess where progress has been the most apparent, highlight positive case studies under the Strategy's key principles to highlight what has worked well, and understand where improvements could have been made to assess overall achievement.

At the close of the Strategy, 29 of the 45 actions have been completed, showing good progress towards the Vision, which is to support Scottish Government analysts to make the equality evidence base more accessible, wide-ranging and robust. A number of the ongoing or delayed action holders plan to continue activities to improve equality data in their area into 2026, showing a wider commitment to improving Scotland's evidence base beyond the life of the Strategy. The final evaluation, due to be published at the end of February 2026, will include transferrable lessons which will feed into the development of the next Equality Evidence Strategy.

Outwith the Strategy, a number of strategic improvements have also contributed to improvements to the equality evidence base across a number of key areas, this includes the Equality Outcomes report 2025-2029, Scottish Government's MOVE2 Programme, and the review of the National Performance Framework.

The next Equality Evidence Strategy (2027)

The next Equality Evidence Strategy will continue to prioritise and support improvements to equality and intersectional evidence across Scottish Government. This Strategy will be developed collaboratively with the EDIP board, analysts, policymakers and external organisations interested in improving equality evidence.

We will be conducting a data audit of Scottish Government datasets, primarily those which are used for producing official or national statistics, informing the new NPF indicators or regularly used for Ministerial or policy decisions. The data audit will identify progress in improving the data landscape since the last audit conducted in October 2021 and highlight possible data gaps to focus on as part of the next Equality Evidence Strategy. As in the 2023 strategy - improvements for evidence collection and reporting will be identified by the range of policy areas according to available opportunities and evidence of policy need and stakeholder demand. The exact future impacts of new data collections on policy processes are uncertain because each area will be at different stages in the policy cycle, with each presenting issue requiring to be addressed on its own merits. Actions chosen for the next Strategy will however represent achievable improvements and be deemed to be a useful investment.

In summer 2025, as part of the initial scoping for the next Equality Evidence Strategy, we organised stakeholder workshops with a range of external organisations, including academics, third sector organisations, and representatives from public services and authorities. These sessions showcased good practice from the current Strategy on using and improving equality evidence and encouraged discussion on potential areas for future improvement. Further engagement will be planned for mid-2026 to ensure the new Strategy is well-informed as it develops.

A draft of the Strategy will be ready for consultation by late November 2026, with a view to publishing the final Strategy by March 2027.

5. Transparency

This section responds to paragraphs 61-66 and the recommendation at paragraph 99.

61. The Committee welcomes the Cabinet Secretary's intentions in overhauling the national outcomes.

62. The Committee also welcomes the Minister's commitment to mainstreaming.

63. At the same time, the evidence presented to the Committee made clear that any progress in transparency has been slow in coming and limited.

64. It is clear to the Committee that significantly more work is required to ensure greater transparency in budget documents, thereby allowing anyone to follow how the money has been spent.

65. There must also be a much greater emphasis on a more joined up approach between the budget, the Programme for Government and the National Performance Framework.

66. That joined up approach must also be applied within the Scottish Government more generally. The Committee has heard a lot of positive narrative about efforts to progress with equalities and human rights across portfolio areas in the Scottish Government. It is clear to the Committee, however, that that ambition has not been realised and the Scottish Government must do more to match the narrative.

99. We recognise that the EFSBS can only snapshot a handful of policy areas. However, we feel strongly that this level of policy evaluation and monitoring should be happening across all areas of service delivery. These suggestions, and the ethos behind them, should be used by the Scottish Government to inform changes within delivery, monitoring and evaluation of other policy areas.

NPF improvements and connections between NPF, budget and PfG

The National Performance Framework is being substantially overhauled because we want it to work better for the people of Scotland. When considering a refreshed set of National Outcomes earlier this year, the evidence was clear that a more substantial, root and branch, reform was required. Ministers considered a range of options based on the evidence gathered from experts and public consultation, and concluded that the longer-term benefits of reform, outweighed the issues with a delay in launching the new national outcomes.

The NPF remains an important vision for the kind of future we want, but that requires us to take the time to rethink and reform the NPF to make it more impactful. The aim is to create a framework that better drives public sector reform, improves collaboration between local and national governments and empowers our

communities. We are in the process of co-producing that new model with key experts in wellbeing, government strategy, and good governance.

Overall, we are proposing to position, and rebrand, NPF as a long-term strategic tool, at the apex of all decision making, and accountability and performance frameworks, to ensure a strong and visible link between strategy, delivery and national outcomes, whatever the government of the day. This includes:

- The reformed NPF will support better linking of budgetary and policy decisions to the National Outcomes. We are currently piloting budget tagging which could be applied to the National Outcomes, pending evaluation of this approach
- We are, as is good practice, developing proposed machinery of government improvements for the next government and parliamentary session. The reformed NPF will be an important element to ensure the National Outcomes are guiding decision making

Transparency of budget documents

The integrated assessment approach we have taken this year aims to ensure that impact evidence informs the Scottish Government's budget choices earlier and more effectively in the decision-making process, while maintaining compliance with our statutory duties. The approach also improve transparency by making it easier for people to see the full picture.

We have consistently listened to comments on how we can improve the transparency of our wider Budget publications and responded, which has been acknowledged by the Finance and Public Administration Committee. We recognise that Parliament has called for greater transparency in publications, particularly around the level of transfers between portfolios. We have listened and made further progress in baselining a significant number of these in the 2026-27 Budget – almost £800 million of these transfers have now been baselined. Whilst we acknowledge some regular transfers remain - these transfers can reflect the complexity of the delivery landscape, and not all the regular transfers can be baselined. In addition, we have improved the level of disclosure on the Operating costs of the government itself – again in response to criticisms.

To aid transparency in the budget document we have again included table A.09, which restates the prior year comparator by removing those transfers not baselined. This allows for direct comparison of the cash and real terms movements for each portfolio in the budget.

Additionally, our corporate transformation programme has delivered new shared HR and finance capabilities to the Scottish Government and more than 30 organisations across the public sector, to collect the data and insights necessary to deliver financial transparency in a way that previously was not available.

Mainstreaming

The Scottish Government and the wider public sector must demonstrate accountability and transparency to both the public and stakeholders in how they deliver their work. As part of this commitment, we have taken significant steps to strengthen equality and human rights budgeting, embedding this within our broader mainstreaming approach.

We continue to drive an ambitious and progressive agenda to ensure that equality and human rights are embedded in all we do. Mainstreaming sets out the Scottish Government's approach to embedding equality and human rights into everything it does and is not a one-off initiative, but a sustained and systemic approach to change that requires leadership, capacity, capability and culture to work in tandem.

To fulfil a Programme for Government 2025-26 commitment and in recognition of this approach, the materials below were launched on 8 December 2025:

- **Mainstreaming Strategy**
The Strategy provides a clear vision and framework for making change in how we develop policy, deliver services and allocate resources. Developing Accountability and Transparency is one of the key drivers for change within the strategy.
- **Mainstreaming Action Plan**
The Action Plan sets out, for the first time in one place, 61 actions outlining the practical steps Government is taking to embed equality and human rights across its systems and processes. The Action Plan brings together Scottish Government actions into a single, accessible, and transparent document, enabling us to lead by example and show how a systematic approach to mainstreaming can drive change across Government and society.
- **Mainstreaming Toolkit**
The Mainstreaming Toolkit marks the first time that the Government has brought together such a comprehensive resource, and we are proud to lead this important step forward in embedding equality and human rights across the public sector. It contains over 100 resources that provide training materials and best practice examples to support Scotland's public sector to strengthen mainstreaming activity.
- **Regulation 12 Report**
Our Regulation 12 Report sets out our ambitious proposals for activity to enable better performance of the Public Sector Equality Duty, from now until December 2029. This includes proposals to improve understanding of the need to foster good relations and to demonstrate leadership and build capacity across Scotland's public sector.

By publishing them together, we aim to increase transparency and accountability by setting out clearly our ambition, what has been committed to and how progress will be measured and reported, while supporting the wider public sector to embed mainstreaming.

We have developed these materials through extensive engagement with communities, organisations, and individuals, including those with lived experience of inequality and exclusion.

This Government is committed to making the principles set out in this suite of Mainstreaming publications a core part of how decisions are made; not as an add-on, but as a foundation for decision-making that benefits everyone, especially those experiencing inequality.

In addition to the above, the Scottish Government has taken significant steps to strengthen equality and human rights by introducing a new approach to the equality outcome-setting to provide greater consistency and leadership, with new equality outcomes published on 25 April 2025.

We also remain committed to a phased approach to improving the effectiveness of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) in Scotland. This includes enhancing the regulatory framework by using the full range of powers under the Scottish Specific Duties, within the limits of devolved competence.

Recognising the need to accelerate progress, we established a dedicated PSED Improvement Team in spring 2025. In July 2025, we also created the PSED Improvement Stakeholder Reference Group - a forum for listed authorities and equality advocacy organisations across Scotland to share views and shape improvement activity. We are now working at pace to deliver this programme of PSED improvement.

These actions reflect our shared commitment to embedding equality and human rights at the heart of decision-making, creating a transparent, accountable and inclusive approach that benefits everyone across Scotland.

6. The participation of citizens in developing and evaluating policy in a meaningful way

This section responds to paragraphs 75-79 and the recommendations in paragraphs 101 and 102.

75. The Committee was not convinced by the Minister's assertion that the Scottish Government is placing an emphasis on participation in the development and evaluation of policy. As the Committee has noted elsewhere the narrative does not appear to be matched by action.

76. The Committee notes that in her evidence to the Committee, the Minister did not highlight any specific examples of participation.

77. Moreover, the modest progress in fiscal transparency is not yet translating into opportunities for meaningful public engagement with the budget. Progress also remains insufficient to facilitate a rights-based analysis of the budget, which is concerning as Scotland progresses to incorporate Economic, Social and Cultural rights into domestic law

78. The Committee encourages the Scottish Government to reflect on its approach to development and evaluation of policy and place a new emphasis on participation in a way that it has not achieved to date.

79. The Committee also reflects on its own experience of participation and co-production working with CARM this year. That input was critical to the Committee's enhanced understanding of how to scrutinise the Scottish Government's budget effectively. The Committee draws this work to the attention not only its successor committee, but to committees more generally in session 7. Effective scrutiny should be shaped by lived experience.

101. In our discussions, we were able to see employability policy from a lived experience perspective. Having constructive conversations meant that we were better able to explore what improvements could be made outside of our recommendations on data and budget documentation. It's clear to us those grassroots organisations such as CARM and community groups, can play a valuable role in the accountability process when exploring services at both a local and national level. We ask again that the Scottish Government commit to increased use of lived experience in policy development and evaluation.

102. We agreed that processes and employability policy should be developed based on qualitative lived experience, using co-design to ensure that the experience and circumstances of both service users, and those that the service does not reach, informs the design and delivery of employability services. This statement could easily apply to other policy areas. Therefore, we ask again that the Scottish Government commit to increased use of lived experience in policy development and evaluation

Strategic Focus on Lived Experience & Participation in policy making

Our 2025–2029 **Equality Outcomes** focusses on three key outcomes that act as enablers of system-wide change: one of which is ‘Lived Experience & Participation’. This outcome is underpinned by both short and long-term actions over a four-year period, with a dual focus on the Scottish Government as both a policymaker and an employer. We have committed to a range of actions to strengthen how we use lived experience and participation within government, for example establishing a procurement process to facilitate high quality participation work and improving coordination of participatory work across government.

‘Utilizing Evidence and Experience’ is also an identified driver in the Mainstreaming Strategy and this includes actively and meaningfully involving those with lived experience and those directly impacted in the design and implementation of policy.

Progress the Scottish Government made on its own work on citizen involvement in the budget

The use of lived experience evidence, alongside other qualitative and quantitative evidence is encouraged across Scottish Government – as highlighted in the Equality Outcomes report 2025-2029 (outcome 2: lived experience and participation). These different forms of evidence can complement each other and allow analysts to build a fuller picture. Individual policy areas and their analysts are encouraged to consider the best use of all evidence across the full policy cycle – from understanding issues, to designing policies and services, and onto their monitoring and evaluation.

Specifically, we will use participatory processes and design research, evidence reviews and evaluations to gather the experiences of people affected, where possible. It is recognised that ongoing improvements can be made to skills and processes to ensure participation is meaningful and inclusive. Strong examples of work drawing on lived experience evidence, in combination with other forms of evidence, are disseminated across government for others to learn from – the ‘Intersectional Evidence Review exploring experiences of Minority Ethnic Women’, for instance.

Open Government

We are taking forward a range of work to improve participation skills and infrastructure within the Scottish Government. This will help us involve people more consistently and effectively in government decision-making. We are working to establish a [procurement process](#) that helps the Scottish Government to involve the public in decisions that affect them in a more supported way – particularly those who are seldom heard, furthest from their rights, or vulnerable. The Scottish Government already has a process for involving children and young people in decision-making, including policy development. Both procurement routes are designed to improve standards and ensure consistency in how participation is carried out across government. These procurement routes will enable us to commission high-quality projects led by skilled practitioners, ensuring that children, young people and adults have meaningful opportunities to take part in decisions that affect them.

We continue to review and improve our staff guidance on participation, the Participation Handbook. This guides good practice in participation across government and will be used as a basis for staff training. A pilot training programme to establish a participation community representative network at Scottish Government is also in development. This programme, along with supporting resources, will help staff design and manage participatory work and build skills across their teams. The trial period for the training programme will run from 2026 to 2027.

In 2024, we published [guidance for the payment of expenses and compensation](#) for time for people taking part in participatory processes. This guidance will minimise financial barriers to involvement and is of particular importance for inclusively involving marginalised groups. In the same year, the Scottish Government also launched a [CivTech Challenge](#) to explore how technology can help us to deliver high-quality, scalable, public participation in decision-making, inspiring trust around ethical data use and sharing, AI, and wider public good activities. This Challenge is jointly sponsored by the Head of Data and Open Government. Work on the Challenge continues into 2026, with the trialling of a new public participation platform, [Comhairle](#), currently underway by policy teams.

In 2025 the Scottish Government published a [report](#) that explored the impact of public participation in policymaking. In particular, this research set out evaluation frameworks that could be used in a Scottish Government setting. It is our intention to review and consider an informed approach to evaluation of participatory work that can be adopted across government. It is still to be determined which team will lead this work going forward.

The co-creation of Scotland's next Open Government Action plan (2026 to 2030) is taking place from November 2025 to April 2026. This process is involving both the public and civil society organisations. The next action plan will build on its ongoing participation commitment by exploring the feasibility and appetite to develop a national participation strategy with civil society – the first of its kind in Scotland. We are increasingly using participation, including lived experience, in policy development. For example, in the third New Scots Strategy, in the Ending Destitution Together Strategy and in the new Anti-Racism Observatory for Scotland's (AROS) work.

Example in practice

In paragraph 76, the committee requested specific examples of participation, and the example below is provided to address this:

The New Scots refugee integration strategy sets out our approach to supporting refugees and people seeking asylum living in Scotland. The third New Scots strategy was published in March 2024. It was developed in partnership by the Scottish Government, COSLA and Scottish Refugee Council and was informed by an engagement process involving over 2,000 refugees and people seeking asylum.

We are committed to ensuring that New Scots continues to be shaped by refugees and people seeking asylum, as well as those with expertise supporting them. As part

of the governance for the third strategy, there is now involvement of those with lived experience as New Scots Core Group Advisers. The Core Group Advisers are a group of individuals with direct experience of seeking protection and rebuilding their lives in Scotland through various humanitarian protection routes. These individuals reflect the diversity of refugee and asylum-seeking voices across Scotland. Their lived experiences, combined with community engagement activities, and their skills in advocacy and monitoring, allow them to represent and advocate for a cross-section of the New Scots communities, bringing more balanced community perspectives to the group.

The first New Scots Core Group Advisers were recruited by Scottish Refugee Council on behalf of New Scots partners in Autumn 2024 and attended their first New Scots Core Group meeting in December 2024. A second round of Advisers were recruited in Autumn 2025 and attended their first New Scots Core Group meeting in December 2025, bringing the current total to 10 Advisers.

The Ending Destitution Together strategy was published jointly by the Scottish Government and COSLA in March 2021 and is a strategy to improve support for people subject to No Recourse to Public Funds. As part of this, the Scottish Government provides funding to Govan Community Project to develop and support a lived experience group, to ensure that the voices of people living in, or at risk of, destitution due to NRPF restrictions are kept at the centre of work to deliver the strategy. This inclusive forum assists in informing the delivery and continued implementation of the strategy and facilitates opportunities for the Scottish Government and other local and national policy makers to continue meaningful engagement with people with lived experience of destitution and NRPF.

The project ensures those with lived experience are supported to develop skills and confidence in engaging with policy development, becoming agents for change on issues which directly affect them. The forum currently consists of eight individuals. Three members have been continuously involved since the group was established in August 2023, and five new members joined in June 2025, with all eight continuing to work together since then.

7. Specific considerations on Employability Case Study

This section responds to the recommendations in paragraphs 98 (in part) and 101-104.

98. *Using the employability as a case study as a start point, we recommend that the Scottish Government:*

- Provide evidence that there is ongoing scrutiny of the quality of services at a local and national level.*
- Publish an Acceptability annex in the EFSBS with Shared Measurement Framework experience tables by group and area, plus dated examples of changes.*
- Evidence voluntariness and consent processes used alongside employability services, and alongside this, confirm that there are no sanctions for those who opt out of using employability services.*
- Introduce retention and exit analysis at 3, 6 and 12 months, with actions taken, to give a better picture of service experience and why services are or are not working.*
- Publish employer-side support measures used to inform adjustments, Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and anti-harassment approaches used in placements.*
- Ensure that each Local Employability Plan demonstrates both rural and urban adaptations and links to local Customer Charters.*
- Recognise the connections between employability and the wider circumstances in geographical areas, by creating links to data on housing quality and education standards. Understanding the wider picture will help to show where employability services need to be tailored and connect to the wider circumstances of people's lives and strengthen the local design and delivery approach.*

101. *In our discussions, we were able to see employability policy from a lived experience perspective. Having constructive conversations meant that we were better able to explore what improvements could be made outside of our recommendations on data and budget documentation. It's clear to us that grassroots organisations such as CARM and community groups, can play a valuable role in the accountability process when exploring services at both a local and national level. we ask again that the Scottish Government commit to increased use of lived experience in policy development and evaluation.*

102. *We agreed that processes and employability policy should be developed based on qualitative lived experience, using co-design to ensure that the experience and circumstances of both service users, and those that the service does not reach, informs the design and delivery of employability services. This statement could easily apply to other policy areas. Therefore, we ask again that the Scottish Government commit to increased use of lived experience in policy development and evaluation*

103. *As part of this commitment, the Scottish Government should act as both a role model and lead for public sector and delivery partners. As a first step, we recommend that the Scottish Government ensure that guidance to LEP's is clear on expectations around service reach and evaluation, including the need for there to be clear channels for feedback from both those who do and don't use the service. Partnership approaches to service development and evaluation with grassroots and community organisations is one area which we feel the Scottish Government could encourage LEPs to undertake pilot activity on.*

104. *Finally, we urge the Scottish Government to continue to invest in the foundations needed for employability programmes to be successful – housing and education, and on the destination – fairly paid, valued, secure and sustainable employment.*

Employability Service Delivery (Recommendation 98)

Delivery of Employability provision at a local level is done so on a partnership basis with Local Government. However, processes have been established to ensure that an understanding of delivery, and impact achieved can be determined nationally.

This is achieved primarily through:

- The quarterly reporting of data, in line with our Shared Measurement Framework for Employability and the Data Reporting Template.
- An ongoing programme of evaluation activity; and
- The relationship manager role within Scottish Government, which engages with LEPs and Local Employability Leads, supports the understanding of delivery of services (supported by Annual Investment Plans submitted from each area, as well as frequent qualitative and financial reporting in-year), in line with Grant requirements and policy intent. This would include issues of sanctions being raised given this would not align with stated policy. Relationship Manager roles also support sharing of best practice, and overcoming challenges faced by partners in delivery of services.

Local Employability Partnerships are required to design and commission services which meet the needs of their local areas, as set out in the Local Employability Partnership Framework. This will entail consideration of geographical challenges, insight from data (both national and local), and insight from partners.

As part of our national policy development, we designed a Customer Charter, with people who had lived experience of engaging with employability support, to set out the expectations user could reasonably have of devolved employability services. These expectations apply to all 32 Local Employability Partnerships – however, some areas do adapt the presentation of this charter to better fit the materials they use to communicate with service users locally.

Our employability policy is clear that links with other public services, such as housing and education is critical in supporting people towards and into sustainable

employment. Employability Key Workers locally will work with participants to understand their circumstance and tailor the support provided accordingly, including signposting or onward referral to other services locally.

Data and Evidence (Recommendation 98)

Though the Shared Measurement Framework for Employability, the Scottish Government has agreed with partners the data that is required to be reported on service provision to enable an understanding of delivery in line with policy intent and impact. That includes data on the sustainment rate of particular outcomes (including job outcomes) at 4, 12, 26 and 52 weeks. Devolved employability services are intended to support those furthest from the labour market, and therefore should someone not sustain an outcome for any reason, services are required to re-engage with them and understand what further support can be provided.

Local Authorities and their delivery partners provide the employability support to help individuals into employment through No One Left Behind funding and operate in keeping with the guidance set out in the Employability Service Standards and Customer Charter. We note the Committee's interest in further information on the employer-side support measures used to inform adjustments, Occupational Safety and Health and anti-harassment approaches used in placements and will engage with Local Authority delivery partners on this area in the coming year.

Lived Experience (Recommendation 101 & 102)

Scottish Government recently published a refreshed Local Employability Partnership (LEP) Framework designed in partnership with local government, third sector, DWP and Skills Development Scotland. LEPs operate in every local authority area in Scotland, and bring together a diverse membership from relevant public, private and third sector organisations, to plan and commission employability provision that is relevant to the local economy and need. The refreshed framework is clear that LEPs are required to undertake the design of services with lived experience involvement, in line with our wider commitment through employability policy to embedding the Scottish Approach to Service Design. We will continue to work with partners to explore further support for local authorities, providers and people using services to better embed lived experience in the design of services.

Our Employability Strategic Plan 2024 – 27 also sets out a commitment to develop a national evaluation plan and effective ways to ensure the voice of lived experience informs continuous improvement at national and local levels. As part of this, we have recently commissioned independent research to explore the experiences of people who have accessed services funded through No One Left Behind. This project is scheduled to be completed during summer 2026 and will shape and influence policy development and delivery of employability services.

Guidance to LEPs (Recommendation 103)

The refreshed LEP Framework strengthens the guidance and provides greater clarity on the expectations of how Local Employability Partnerships should

function including representation of organisations and their roles and responsibilities and the importance of data and evidence in supporting decision making.

We have set out a medium-term commitment within our Employability Strategic Plan to work with partners across our communities to ensure provision is diverse, inclusive and responsive to community need and to raise awareness of employability services and improve access for those who are currently not engaged, including those who are economically inactive. We will work with partners locally and nationally and across the other actions which aim to improve communication and strengthen partnership working to maximise impact from our investment in devolved employability services.

Investment (Recommendation 104)

Our employability services focus on providing a holistic and no wrong door approach with streamlined referral processes into other services recognising that meeting basic life needs, including secure housing, is essential for employment to be sustainable.

We will continue to ensure high quality employability services are available in all 32 local authority areas in 2026-27 as we work with local government and wider partners to deliver the priorities set out in our Employability Strategic Plan. This will include continued investment in Parental Employability Support as part of this Government's mission to reduce Child Poverty, and continued investment in Specialist Employability Support for disabled people and people with long-term health conditions.

Fair Work Action Plan

We continue to use Fair Work to ensure fairly paid, valued, secure and sustainable employment. In December 2022, Scottish Ministers launched our refreshed Fair Work Action Plan: Becoming a Leading Fair Work Nation by 2025, alongside our Anti-Racist Employment Strategy, which aims to take an intersectional approach, where possible, to tackling the structural labour market barriers faced by disadvantaged groups in Scotland's labour market including women, disabled people, racialised minorities and the over 50's workforce.

In fulfilment of a Fair Work Action Plan commitment, in April 2025 the Scottish Government launched a [Fair Work digital resource hub](#) for employers, which provides case studies that set out the benefits of Fair Work for both business and employees. Created in partnership with stakeholders, the hub provides guidance on implementing fairer working practices, including flexible working and diversity & inclusion.

Anti-Racist Employment Strategy

In December 2022 we published our Anti-Racist Employment Strategy which seeks to respond to the scale and challenge of institutional racism. The strategy supports and encourages employers to take an anti-racist and intersectional approach to addressing racial inequality in the workplace. It offers clear and practical guidance to

improve data practices across the employment journey to improve the recruitment and representation of racialised minority staff and build fair, diverse and inclusive workplaces.

Fair Work First

Fair Work First is the Scottish Government's key policy for driving fair work practices across the labour market and applies fair work principles to grants, contracts and other funding awarded by and across the public sector. It was introduced in 2019-20 and has been implemented incrementally since then.

We strengthened our approach to conditionality in 2023 - making it a requirement on public sector grants recipients to pay at least the real Living Wage to all employees and provide appropriate channels for effective workers' voice, such as trade union recognition. This applies to grants awarded from 1 July 2023 and eligible agriculture grants awarded from 1 April 2024. Between 1 July 2023 and 31 March 2025, it is estimated that over £6 billion in public sector grants was awarded with Fair Work First criteria attached.